

SEA LETTER



OF THE SAN FRANCISCO MARITIME MUSEUM / January 1974

A Display of Paintings  
By Sailorman Edward  
"Icy" Helgason

The San Francisco Maritime Museum has extended its exhibit of ship portraits by Edward Helgason through this month. The display continues in the central area of the museum's main floor.

Icy Helgason was born on a farm in Iceland in 1895 and went to sea in his early teens, in a cod fisherman out of Reykjavik. Following this, he did an eight-year stint at a Norwegian whaling station on South Georgia, in the extreme southern hemisphere. In 1925 he made his first salmon fishing voyage with the Alaska Packer fleet, first aboard the bark *Star of Peru*, then a year later in the *Star of Alaska*, the Museum's *Balclutha*. He made four voyages in her, and between them skippered his own 90-foot West Coast Tuna fisherman, *Western Traveler*. During the war he sailed on troopships, and aboard liners from 1945 until his retirement from the sea in 1951.

Since moving ashore and taking up residence in San Francisco, Mr. Helgason began painting the ships in which he served and the seas and ports through which they moved. He strives for meticulous accuracy in his ship portraits, all fine examples of an art which expresses the relationship between sailorman and his ships.

Following are some comments by Mr. Helgason relating some of his experiences at sea which in later years he recorded on canvas with oil paint, the pictures which are in the current exhibit. These were some of Mr. Helgason's remarks in a conversation with Museum Director Karl Kortum last February in the Museum.



## "I always liked a big sea, but. . ."

I was on the *Alitak*, a cannery tender, going to Chignik, Alaska, 1936. We left on a Friday 13th of April. We had a terrible blow in the Gulf of Alaska as shown in this painting. We were 13 in the crew, lost a lifeboat and 13 bags of coal. It took us 13 days to get there and it was my 13th trip to Alaska.

I thought we were a goner. . . I was scared to death; I thought we were going to go. . . they were not seas—they were walls of water. There were about three of them and they nearly finished us. One more sea like that. . . we had only two feet of freeboard when we left San Francisco.

The engine room got flooded so we had to sail just on the stays'l. . . the foundation of the davits tore up the deck when the lifeboat went and the fo'c's'le got flooded.

I was in my bunk when it struck—I was asleep. I was standing on my head for a minute there, and half drowned at the same time by the water that came in. We stuffed the hole full of blankets later.

Martin, the skipper, had tried to heave her to under the stays'l, but it didn't work. So he was trying to run before it, but the waves caught up with him. Those waves that time were the biggest I ever saw in fifty years of going to sea. Actually it wasn't these big seas that did the damage—they couldn't hurt her. It was a smaller wave on top of the big wave. My painting shows the aftermath—we have come out on deck to see what hit us.

I always liked a big sea—the bigger the better. But after those three big waves hit us I hated the sight of a big sea for a couple of years afterward. I would even wake up in my bunk when she leaned over a little far. It was the first time I was ever afraid at sea.

A Pacific American Co. steamer lost two men overboard and the deckload in that same blow in the Gulf of Alaska. They

usually took up piling for the traps.

The captain was A. Martin. He was a steam schooner captain, a heavy boozier, but a good seaman. He was buried at Chignik the following year; he was only in his early thirties. Martin told me when he signed on that a girl in the office said: "My God, what a breath you have!"

"You would have, too, if you used what I do—." He meant whiskey and snuff.

As I have said before, it was a tradition in the Alaska Packers ships that you went to sea drunk. Martin was in that condition when we left. Coming around Point Reyes a sea got up and I was at the wheel. Martin was standing there in the wheelhouse, a high water mark from snuff on his upper lip and a good ballasting of whiskey in him. She plunged and he knocked his head against the window—he wasn't too steady on his feet.

"Icy," he said, "have a drink."

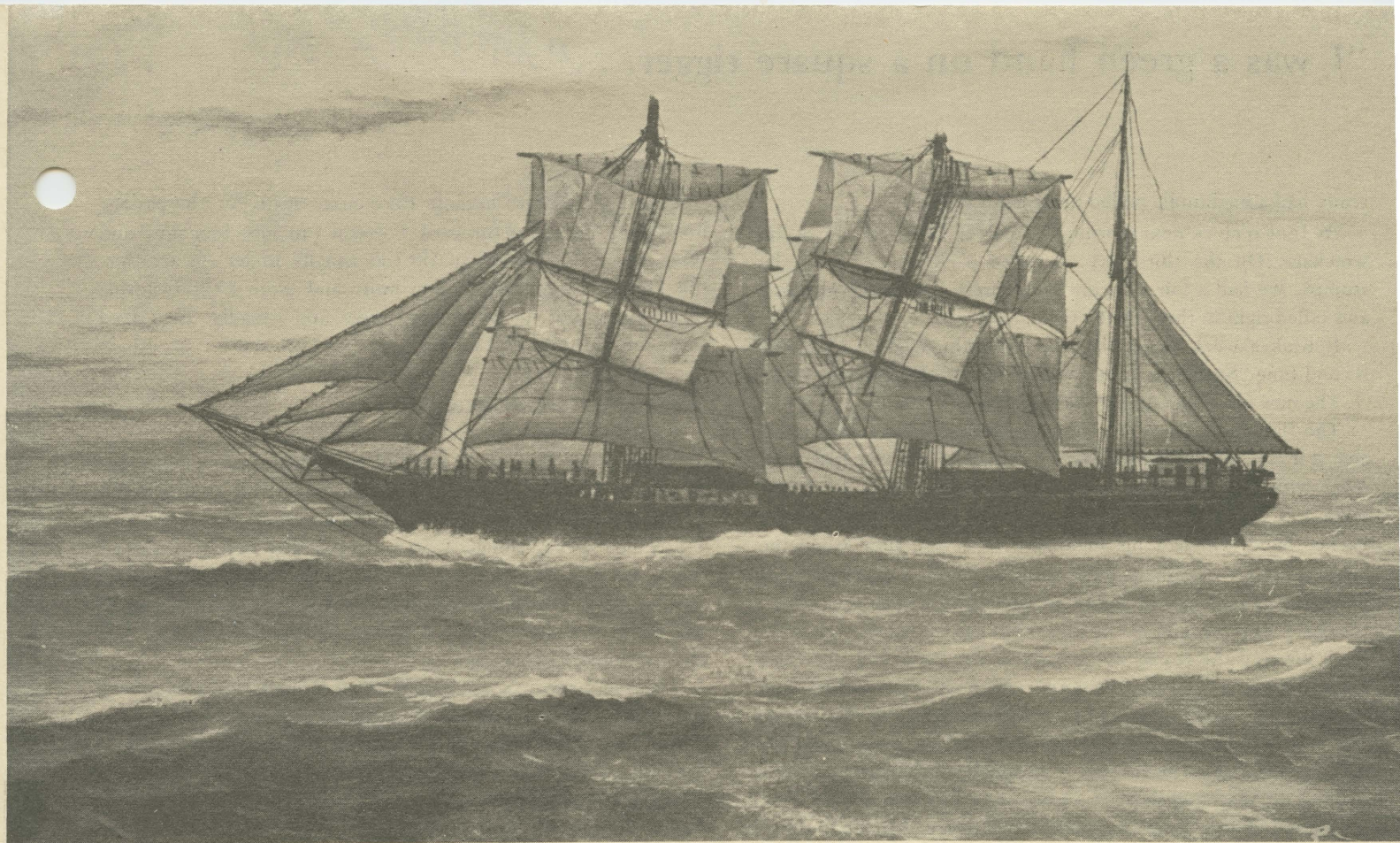
"Martin, I can't take a drink. I'm seasick now."

"What kind of a damn sailor are you, anyhow?" he said. He did not say any more on the subject.

The first night at sea after supper, he brought an alley cat out of his seabag. The cat had no hair on its tail, he was that run down. Martin said that with thirteen men in the crew, he thought it was a good idea to bring another along. The cat was sitting on a bench in the galley when we went over that time. The cat jumped onto a shelf. We had to break the back of the shelf to get him out—he was in the galley but the galley was washed out. Little Johnny had prepared a good Sunday dinner—that went, too.

Later in the season, *Alitak* went to the Alaska Packers cannery at Alitak in Kodiak Island, and here that gray alley cat went ashore in a romantic mood. When it came time to sail the





*The STAR OF PERU dismasted at her topmast caps a few hours out of San Francisco*

cat could not be found. Martin asked the postman to send him to Chignik by mail on the next boat.

Sure enough there was a box for us on the mail boat. It had a cat in it but it was not our cat. This one was striped and looked like a lynx. He acted like one, too—he was that mad at being in the box. Nobody could go near him for days. Some time later he calmed down, but he was not to be trusted. Martin had to pay the freight bill for this monstrosity and he did not like it.

## *The Star of Peru* dismasted

"Stavanger John"—he was a heavy set, big man, very strong. He was unusual, that is. You couldn't forget him once you saw him. But he abused himself, no food—all drink. He was a fisherman when we first left in the *Star of Peru*; he was promoted to third mate when we left port the second time.

Bill Soderquist was mate. A Danish fellow, Carlsen, was originally second. He got hurt when we got dismasted—he got squeezed between the rigging. We left him behind and "Good Looking Jack," the third mate, was promoted to his job.

The Captain was de Sassie. A small man. I remember he had a hard set mouth.

The tug had let us go, all sail was set, a nice breeze. We were about ten miles south of the Farallons. There were sixty fishermen signed on—twenty to a watch; over a hundred people on board in all. I think they were all drunk except me.

I looked up and saw the masts shaking violently every time a

swell set her down hard. The rigging appeared to be all loose to me. But I didn't dare say anything—I was going to sea for the first time in a square rigger. I said to myself: "If that mast"—I was watching the mainmast—"is going to stay up, then I'm all cock-eyed." I decided the best place to be was down below. We had just had our supper. By this time there were only a few people on deck—they were all down below tasting their moonshine. They brought it aboard in little wooden kegs. Those were moonshine days—1925.

The trip was not supposed to be a success without heavy drinking at the departure. That was the tradition in the Alaska Packer ships. But I was too green to join in. Actually, for all the drinking, it turned out to be the poorest year ever in the Bristol Bay fishery.

The fishermen, everybody, were all sitting and tasting when it happened. I had just got down below. The whole ship shook. I heard a yell that she had been dismasted. Both gallant masts had come down, carrying the topmast heads with them.

It was beginning to get dark. There wasn't much we could do except take in the lower sails and drift there. We lashed the topgallant masts where they were dangling and smashing back and forth and hammering the lower masts.

We furled the mains'l and had just started down when we heard "Stavanger John" hollering. He was drunk, up on the foreyard. I will never forget it—he was well on his way to getting the fores'l furled single handed.

So we went up the foremast and gave him a hand. John al-

## "I was a green hand on a square rigger. . ."

ready had a big bundle pulled up in front of him. . .

At four o'clock next morning we started in to send down the wreckage. On the third day we sailed back into port on the stumps. We had a fair tide and wind coming in in the morning and sailed right in through the Golden Gate.

It took a week to rig the ship up again. When we left this second time "Stavanger John" was promoted third mate.

The new mast was almost my undoing.

The first good day at sea, maybe a week out, I was sent up to give it a coat of linseed oil. An old Italian called "Slackadaguy" went with me. Two men were sent up the foremast to do the same job there. Old "Slackadaguy" was a well-known Alaska Packer hand. He had his nickname from the time when the schooners and steam schooners unloaded with a single swinging cargo boom and the guy had to be slacked with each sling load.

There were no ratlines on the royal rigging, so the watch on deck lowered the royal, we got astride the yard, and then they hoisted it back up. "Slackadaguy" sat on the yard with the can of linseed oil in a bucket and I scrambled the rest of the way up the mast. There was about seven feet of bare pole above the collar of the royal backstays. I wrapped my legs and one arm around the mast and slopped on the linseed oil with a rag.

What I didn't count on was how slippery that made everything. I started to slip. I couldn't stop myself. I gripped the mast like iron but it was no use; I couldn't get a grip with my oily hands. . . I was slipping, slipping. I began to go faster. I slid down what was left of the wooden pole and was now descending the backstay. It was smaller, but I still couldn't stop myself. I had gone right past "Slackadaguy."

At the last minute, I remembered I had a red bandana handkerchief in my hip pocket. I let go with one hand and reached for it and grabbed that big wire with the handkerchief in my hand.

The bandana did it. It was dry and I got a good grip and I stopped. I went back down to deck, considerably shaken. I was a green hand on a square rigger; somebody had assumed I had more experience.

Years later I met "Slackadaguy" on the *Front*. He told me that he was going to die. I told him not to talk that way, but he said he knew. There was no pension or Social Security in those days; old men like him used to just die at the side of the street. Sure enough, a week later I read in the newspaper that he was dead.

We didn't bring much cargo in the *Star of Peru*, supplies for the cannery, that is, but the bigger ships did. The *Star of Lapland* and the *Star of Shetland* were both of them three times our size and they not only supplied Diamond J cannery at Kogiung but other canneries up and down the river. They must have carried a couple of thousand tons of coal, for instance, between them—I know, because at one point I was shoveling it. The coal was for the boilers in the canneries.

Some of the men from the *Shetland* fished at our cannery, but as I said earlier, it was the worst year they ever had up there. When the season was over the salmon pack from Diamond J cannery—what there was of it—was loaded in the big ships. But all we loaded in the *Star of Peru* was gravel for ballast—we were obliged to sail back to San Francisco with an empty ship.

"Stavanger John" became third mate again for the passage homeward bound. Afterward I would run into him now and then on the Embarcadero. He was usually under the weather; the liquor was getting to him more and more I think during these years. But he was always quiet and friendly. He talked slow. I used to slip him a dollar. . .

### Whaling on South Georgia

When I left Iceland in the fall of 1913, my first place was Tonsberg, Norway. I was so taken by seeing big trees growing in the streets that I had to go over and touch one to be sure that I was not seeing things. I was all eyes that first trip abroad. When we departed Norway for the South Atlantic, we passed the wrecked *Preussen* in the English Channel. I think one of the masts was down, the yards were in disarray. They told us she had a cargo of pianos.

On South Georgia our yearly catch was about 1,000 whales per station. There were six stations on the island while I was there. You went down in a company ship and moved ashore for two years; in the South Shetlands you signed on a ship in Norway and stayed on in her until you got back. Actually in South Georgia the limit of the contract was two years; they had to get you down there and back in that time.

The Norwegians came over and recruited about forty Icelanders. I was about the youngest—I was 17. But I had worked for the owner of a whaling station in Iceland on Mjoeifjord for almost three years, starting in 1911. His name was Hans Elefson.

The only way to get a drink in South Georgia was to find a harpoon. You got ten crown and a bottle of whiskey if you could find one. One Sunday afternoon I went walking and I found one after the other. There had been whales beached there, lying at that particular part of the shore, for years. There had been many snow slides the previous winter, and a slide must have come and pushed the carcasses out to sea. The harpoons had dropped through them—rotted through. At least this is the only solution I can figure out. This was about 1919. I had found about three harpoons previously. I was a loner; I liked to take walks. South Georgia was a God-forsaken place, but I thought it was great at the time; I didn't know any better.

It happened to be a very low tide this particular Sunday afternoon and pretty soon I had located about fourteen harpoons. I couldn't believe my eyes. I got a kid to help me; we got a little scow and went and picked them up. I took them to the manager. He was dumbfounded.

"You must have let them accumulate purposely," he said.

"No, these are much older than the harpoons we are using now. These are different harpoons." I was the first flenser. I knew what I was talking about.

The manager didn't really want to give me the bottles. We agreed on one each two weeks, no trouble about the money. He was afraid I would get the rest of them drunk if he gave me the whiskey all at once. That would be the worst thing that could happen. Sometimes those men got drunk on home brew. They came in the middle of the night and wanted to see your liver—Finns, Argentines. The devil of an Iclander comes and takes the best job. . .